

Ferenc Berko

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By Valerie Gladstone

Hungarian-born photographer Ferenc Berko (1916-2000) grew up in Europe in the 1930s, influenced by Bauhaus teachers Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and especially Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Escaping to London with the rise of Nazism, he began a peripatetic career that took him all over the world, shooting pictures, making films, teaching and quickly becoming a formidable figure in photography. Considered among the 100 most important photographers of the 20th century, he excelled at portraits, nudes and abstractions, shooting over the years amazingly varied and powerful pictures that are now museums in the United States and Europe.

He shot this outstanding selection of 48 vintage black-and-white photographs from the 1930s to the early 1950s. In the intimacy of a gallery, viewers have the opportunity to see close up his infinite skill at transforming his subjects into haunting shapes, shadows and forms. In a nude taken in Paris in 1937, a woman pulls her hair off the nape of her neck, her face hidden by her shoulder. One curl hangs loose, its curve echoing the curve of her breast. All soft angles in shades of gray, it conveys a quiet sweetness.

Never repeating himself, he photographed a full figure nude in Chicago in 1950, whose fluid shape is reminiscent of those in Matisse's "The Dance," her arms outstretched, one leg in front of the other, all in shadow but for the tinge of light on her breast and forehead. His solarized nudes on the other hand look like Giacometti sculptures, elongated and floating in space.

He lavished the same attention on objects and scenes as he did on nudes. By shooting "Chowpatty Beach, Bombay" from a distance, he caught an unearthly quality in the masses of people on the beach. In the breathtaking "Early Morning Market, Nowshera, India," a woman walks across a courtyard, her shadow and those of a tree and animals like ghosts. She has her hand to her head, a simple gesture that gives the entire picture poignancy.

While his images are more often poetic and sensual than humorous, his "Denture Shop, Rawalpindi, India" shows his wit and sense of irony. Outside a dark shop with a sign reading "Teeth," huge models of dentures are displayed, one on top of the other, the shopkeeper just inside the entrance diminished by all his wares. Unifying all his photos is his infinite care with every last detail of the composition. There is not a false note here. Only harmony.

Ferenc Berko through Jan. 23.